

Philosophy's Search for the Immutable

0.1 The American philosopher

Our characterization of the human being and their understanding of the world during the 19th century in the United States involves a number of characteristics:

1. fallible but not skeptical (Peirce and James)
2. knowledge of the mind through observation and experience (Peirce)
3. a product of a natural (biological) and intellectual history (Peirce and James)
4. meaning of words is found in the future (Peirce)
5. idealistic: reality must be cognizable or understandable (Peirce)
6. not anti-religious: having a right to believe in religious matters when they do not conflict with facts (James)

The last topic we will consider involves the role philosophy is to play in our lives. Consider, for a moment, two different stances one might take toward philosophy:

- Theory 1: Philosophy is simply a theoretical discipline with no practical relevance to human life.
- Theory 2: Philosophy is, at least partly, a practical discipline with relevance for human life.

Discussion 1 *Which of the above two perspectives do you have about philosophy and philosophers? Give a reason to support your view.*

0.2 Summary of Escape from Peril

Let's formulate a points that are hinted at in earlier chapter, some of which Dewey also raises at the beginning of this chapter.

One of Dewey's principal claims is that there has been an equation between that which is certain and that which counts as knowledge. They are said to be coextensive: (i) anything that is knowledge is certain and (ii) anything that is certain is knowledge. Let's call this the knowledge-as-certainty theory.

Definition 1 (knowledge as certainty theory (KAC))

The knowledge as certainty theory asserts that one only knows a proposition P if and only if one is certain that P .

Next, Dewey takes knowledge to be *theoretical* in nature. What might be called "practical knowledge" (knowing how to do P) cannot be known with certainty and so is sometimes referred to as mere belief.

Definition 2 (knowledge is theoretical (KIS)) *If S knows P , then S 's knowledge is theoretical (knowing that P or knowing about P) rather than practical (knowing how to P).*

Finally, there is a ordering or hierarchy in terms of values. Dewey contends that philosophers have associated trying to attain knowledge with the attempt to transcend belief. In short, knowledge is superior to belief and the theoretical is superior to the practical. Let's call this the knowledge-as-superior theory.

Definition 3 (knowledge as superior theory (KAS))

The knowledge as superior theory asserts that knowing P (theoretical knowledge) is more important than simply believing P (practical knowledge).

0.3 The effect of KAC and KAS on philosophy and nature

With KAC, KAS, and KIS formulated, we can now turn to the principal topic of the chapter. Dewey contends that this chapter ("Philosophy's Search for the Immutable") concerns "the effect of the ideal of certainty as something superior to belief upon the conception of nature and the function of philosophy" (LW4:21). In short, the chapter concerns what effect both KAC and KAS have on our understanding of science and the role philosophy is to play in society.

0.3.1 Greek thought

Dewey begins by pointing out that the Greeks drew a distinction between "truths" that were obtain by way of experience and truths that were rational truths (relations of ideas). Along this distinction, Dewey says the Greeks made a number of claims about each type of truth.

Rational truths were said to be

1. necessary
2. exact
3. universal
4. completely demonstrated by reason
5. scientific
6. reflective of reality
7. count as knowledge

Example 1 *Some examples include: $2+2=4$, everything is identical to itself, all bachelors are unmarried men, and there*

is no algorithm to determine whether a polynomial has an integer root.

In contrast, the “truths” of experience were said to be:

1. probabilistic
2. inexact or approximate
3. only applicable within limits
4. determined by way of observation and experiment
5. less than science or somehow practical
6. not reflective of reality
7. less than knowledge (associated with beliefs)

The effect then of KAS and KAC on philosophy was that there was no hostility between natural science and philosophy. Instead, there was simply a hierarchy of knowledge, with those truths obtained by experience at the bottom while those truths obtained by a rational method at the top. Philosophy was able to treat itself as superior for understanding nature since it adopted the only rational approach to understanding the world.

0.3.2 The scientific revolution

Dewey notes however that a major shift occurred between philosophy and science in the 17th century. This occurred because of the application of mathematics (an exact, rational, and demonstrative method) to natural objects. Laws of the natural world took on a more, precise formulation and the laws formulated by physics were said to be universal in nature. This shift threatened philosophers since it moved the study of natural objects out of the domain of philosophy and into the realm of science.

Example 2 *The study of astronomical bodies was no longer a study using philosophical or theological principles but one that involved mathematics.*

In short, philosophy was no longer seen as the highest discipline nor did it explain as much. What was previously explained by philosophy was now explained by science.

0.3.3 The effect on philosophy

Given the rise of modern science, Dewey raises two objections to the function that philosophy can play in human life. The second objection reads as follows:

Those interested in philosophy may object that the criticisms passed are directed if not at a man of straw at least to positions that have long since lost their actuality. Those not friendly to any form of philosophy may inquire what import they have for any except professed philosophers (LW4:23).

The general idea behind this objection is that philosophy is **no longer relevant** (except to philosophers themselves) for any practical or theoretical issue. Science and technology can tell us everything we need to know and provide all of that we need. We can formalize this argument as follows:

- P1: If science tells us all we need to know about the natural world, then philosophy tells us nothing about the natural world.
- P2: If the relevance of philosophy was found in its capacity to explain the natural world, then it lacks any relevance or value.
- C: Therefore, philosophy lacks any relevance or value.

Dewey is critical of this perspective but I find his criticism unclear. So, instead, I'll develop a variation on his argument in the next section.

0.4 Dewey's response

The above argument against philosophy carries with a problematic *philosophical* assumption. Namely, it assumes that **the only thing that has any value or worth to the human being are material in nature**. These include:

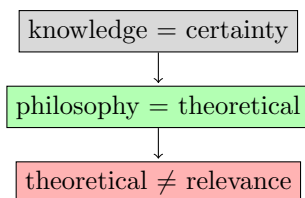
1. health
2. wealth
3. control of the natural conditions of the world
4. bodily security
5. police order
6. the increase of comfort

These are the things that technology and science can provide for us. For Dewey this is a controversial and philosophical assumption since it assumes **that which has value for human life is tied to the promotion of one's material self-interest**. Dewey thus rejects **P2** in that he thinks the relevance of philosophy is not completely found in its capacity to give us theoretical knowledge about the natural world. His argument is relatively straightforward.

- P1: The assumption that science and technology can provide us with everything that gives life value assumes that the value of human life is tied up with the list above.
- P2: The list above is incomplete. There are other things in life that give human beings value, viz., that make our lives worth living.
- C: Therefore, science and technology cannot provide us with everything that gives life value.

Discussion 2 *The key premise in the above argument is P2. What are other things in life make life valuable, are worth knowing how to obtain? Can everything be provided by science and technology?*

Even if Dewey rejects the extreme claim that philosophy has no practical relevance, he nevertheless agrees with a version of the above claim. Namely, Dewey accepts the following: *philosophy when it focuses entirely on the theoretical and equates knowledge with certainty is irrelevant to human life*. The claim then is that when philosophy equates knowledge with certainty, it becomes a purely theoretical discipline. And, when it is practiced as a purely theoretical discipline, it becomes irrelevant for human life.



But, for Dewey, philosophy need not equate knowledge with certainty and need not view itself as a purely practical discipline. In other words, **philosophy is not inherently impractical**.

Dewey does not provide a very detailed account of what a more practical philosophy would look like (at least not here) but he does provide us with a sketch of the primary practical tasks of philosophy (and those working in the humanities more generally).

According to Dewey, the primary tasks of philosophy are the following:

1. secure things of value, that are admirable, honorable, approvable (LW4:25, 26)
2. maintain and diffuse intellectual values, moral excellences, and the esthetically admirable
3. maintain order and decorum in human relations (LW4:25)
4. secure and expand all things that make life worthwhile (LW4:25)

He thus views philosophy's task as practical one. It is *less* about knowing the ultimate nature of reality and *more* about knowing how to do certain things. Its task is *practical* even though it is not technical or scientific.

Dewey contends then that the real problem with the philosophy is **not that it is impractical** but that philosophers **equate knowledge with certainty and so focus purely on the theoretical**. They attempt to gain certainty about the nature of values, on attempting to prove necessary truths, on essential properties of reality, on pure knowledge (knowledge as certainty). In putting their entire focus on the theoretical it disconnects itself and distracts us from its primary task (see list above). Thus, the primary problem is with KAC. Believing in KAC narrows the scope of philosophical inquiry.

Discussion 3 *Dewey provides an outline of the primary practical tasks of philosophy above. How might you make his list more specific? What specifically can the humanities do to benefit human life.*

0.5 Some consequences of making philosophical practical

Dewey outlines at least potential consequences concerning a more practical philosophy.

First, it would reject all mere theoretical doubt or uncertainty. The argument is as follows:

- P1: All inquiry is tied to solving the problems of life, viz., obtaining greater security as to action.
- P2: Inquiry by way of theoretical doubt makes no difference and so solves no problem.
- C: Therefore, pure theoretical doubt (“*merely* theoretical uncertainty”) has no meaning (a “purely intellectual uncertainty, [...] one upon which nothing hangs” does not exist) because pure theoretical doubts make no difference to anyone anywhere (LW4:31).

Second, it would involve asking different forms of philosophical questions than those that are traditionally raised.

- Rather than *what is knowledge?* or *what can be known?* (pure theory), it would ask *what do we need to know?* and *how shall we obtain that knowledge?* and *how shall we apply it?* (LW4:30)
- Rather than merely asking “what makes something valuable”, it would ask “what shall we do to make objects having value more secure in existence?” (LW4:35)
- Rather than asking how to resolve the conflict between philosophy and science, it would ask “what does [scientific] knowledge imply and entail with respect to the guidance of our emotional and volitional life?” or *how can our emotional and volitional lives take* “hold of what is known in order to make it of service”? (LW4:36)